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My Own Dance With Awkwardness in a Cab

By Paul Rimple

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Merab steered his taxi into incoming traffic to make a brazen U-turn and said the marshrutka strike, which had wreaked havoc on Tbilisi's public transportation system for more than a week, had not improved his business.

"The drivers just got in their cars and became taxi drivers," he said.

I gave him 8 lari for a 5 lari ride. He used to be my neighbor.

Merab is one of perhaps thousands of freelance taxi drivers in Tbilisi who are working in an industry that remains unregulated. Anybody can put a yellow light on top of their jalopy and become a taxi driver in Georgia. They don't need a special license or a meter.

Several years ago, there was talk of making meters mandatory, not for the passenger's sake but as a means to collect taxes.

This plan, however, fell by the wayside.

There are an estimated 15,000 unregistered taxis in Tbilisi, and the law would have had a profound effect on those many families whose breadwinners drive taxis.

For the foreign visitor, getting in a Georgian taxi can be what Californian yoga teachers call "a dance with awkwardness."

In most cases, the tourist can expect to pay up to three times the local rate, or more if they happen to get Merab.

While a smattering of Georgian will score you a few points, it's no guarantee you won't be charged the "alien tax."

Guidebooks recommend you arrange a price beforehand, which is good advice if you speak one of the local languages and know how much it typically costs to get to point B.

Better advice is to ask your hotelier or waitress how much a ride to X should cost and pay the driver that amount upon delivery.

He will rarely protest, especially if you add a couple of extra lari to the fare.

Remember, even when you're being gypped, Georgian taxis are still cheaper than in most places.

Being overcharged isn't the only challenge a foreign passenger should expect.

If you can communicate on a basic level, then you'll have to endure the "Where are you from/How many children you have/How much money do you make?" line of questioning.

You may have to tolerate some outlandish conspiracy theories, or you may even be taken for the most Georgian ride of all — sitting at the driver's dinner table, eating roast pork and drinking his homemade wine.

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